



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN KEENE, M. D.
1809 - 1856

Founder of California Medical Association

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN KEENE*

FOUNDER OF THE CALIFORNIA MEDICAL
ASSOCIATIONBy LOUISE F. HAYS
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BENJAMIN FRANKLIN KEENE was born Sept. 1, 1809,¹ in Lynn, Mass., son of Josiah Keene and his wife, Avis Swift Keene. On his father's side, his geneology may be traced back directly to John and Martha Keene who came to New England in 1638; to Thomas Prence, Governor of Plymouth Colony, 1632-1673; to Reverend Stephen Batchelder, who organized the first church in Lynn; to William Collier; Robert Barker; Reverend John Wing; and Reverend Henry Pratt and Jacob Dingley, early settlers of New England. On his mother's side, he was descended from Francis Cooke, who came over on the Mayflower; William Swift, Thomas Tilden, Thomas Bassett, and Thomas Hatch, early settlers of New England. His family were Quakers; his mother was a minister in the Quaker Meeting House in Lynn, and John G. Whittier, a distant cousin, spoke at her funeral. Both his father and mother are buried in the Churchyard of the old Quaker Meeting House, in the center of the present city of Lynn.

EARLY EDUCATION

Benjamin, their oldest child, was sent to the Friends School at Providence, Rhode Island, now Moses Brown College. He is on the register of that college from 1827 to 1828. Here he met Joel Branham, and in the summer of 1827 he went with him for vacation to his home at Eatonton, Georgia. While there, Joel's older brother, Dr. Henry Branham, (who was at that time President of the Central Medical Society of Georgia²), persuaded the boys to study medicine, offering to teach them and take them into his office. Benjamin returned to his school in Providence, and then went to Nantucket, Mass., and read medicine under his uncle, Dr. Paul Swift, who afterwards became President of Haverford College in Philadelphia. In 1830, Benjamin returned to Georgia to join the Branham doctors in Eatonton for practice as "Physician, Surgeon and Dentist." After a year in Eatonton, Dr. Keene realized that three doctors were too many for so small a place, so he moved eighteen miles south to Hillsboro, Jasper County, Georgia.

FAMILY HISTORY

He soon became infatuated with the beautiful Harriet Bell, daughter of Bailey Bell, and they

were married May 12, 1831.³ He then moved to Brownsville, near Forsyth, Georgia, where his two daughters, Lucinda Morris and Virginia, were born.

In December, 1832, while Dr. Keene and his family were on a visit to the family of Mrs. Keene's half-sister, Mrs. Rebecca King O'Daniel (whose family had lately removed to Talbot County), he was granted, on the presentation of a thesis on Cholera Infantum,⁴ a "permanent license" to practice medicine in Georgia by the State Board of Physicians and Surgeons.

On account of his wife's failing health he returned to Hillsboro, where he remained until his removal to California in 1849. From old records, family tradition, and patients, it has been learned that he had a wide practice in Hillsboro. Miss Joe Varner, who lived perhaps twenty miles away in the adjoining county of Jones, remembered him as their "handsome family physician, when he came on horseback, wearing a bottle-green broadcloth suit, with his medicine in his saddle bags."

During these years he was called upon for "orations" at public gatherings, one of which he delivered at Kindernook, near Eatonton. Mr. Allen Lawrence told Medora Keene of Dr. Keene's eloquence, and said the dinner consisted of a chicken pie, containing a hundred chickens! According to Mrs. Turner, an historian of Putnam County, this *pièce de résistance* was used in that community on the occasion of public dinners on distinguished occasions. Another record found of his eloquent speaking is contained in a letter written by Dr. Keene, dated June 15, 1846, from Hillsboro to his daughter Lucinda, then a student at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. He states: "I have been appointed to deliver an oration in Monticello on the 4th of July."

His wife lived only a short time after their return to Hillsboro, and in 1841, Dr. Keene was married to Ann Eliza Frances Reese, aged 15, daughter of Cuthbert Reese and his wife Tabitha Clark Reese, of Hillsboro.⁵ The next year their daughter Medora Ann Keene was born, and the young mother died the following year, leaving Dr. Keene, aged 34, again a widower, with two sets of children. His wife's broken-hearted parents took the new baby, and he sent his two older daughters to his mother in Massachusetts. More accustomed to Southern ways, they remained only a short time, preferring to live with their grandfather Bailey Bell in Jasper County. His daughter, Lucinda Keene, married Gordon Sanford Bunkley, of Jones County, and Virginia married (1) Jones, and (2) Major William John Howard; and both families removed to Alabama where they have many descendants, including the late Mrs. T. D. Samford, of Opelika; Willard Wescott; the late William B. Howard; Adolphus Bunkley, of Montgomery; Mrs. R. P. Duke, of West Point, Miss., and many others.

His daughter Medora, married Major James D. Frederick, of Marshallville, Georgia, and was the mother of Jamie (Mrs. Oscar McKenzie) and Louise (Mrs. J. E. Hays) Frederick.

* This article is contributed by Mrs. J. E. Hays, a granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin Keene, who is now Director of the Department of Archives and History of the State of Georgia. The Committee on History of the California Medical Association expresses its deep appreciation for the generous services extended by Mrs. Hays, through whose aid the California Medical Association has become the owner of an oil portrait of the founder of the "Medical Society of the State of California" (former name of the California Medical Association).

For editorial reference, see page 283. In April issue, page 216.

Hoping to reunite his children, Dr. Keene married, Sept. 29, 1844,⁶ an estimable widow of Jasper County, Mrs. Ann T. Price; but for some reason his plans did not work, and very little is known of this marriage.

MEXICAN WAR

He went to the Mexican War, family tradition says, as a surgeon, but the records of the War Department show: "Enlisted June 7, 1847 at Bonham, mustered in July 3, 1847 at Austin for 12 months. Private in Capt. Kimsey's Co. K, 1st Reg. (J. C. Hays) Texas Mounted Volunteers. Promoted Jan. 14, 1848, corporal, mustered out, with his Co. Apr. 30, 1848 at Vera Cruz, Camp Washington, Mexico." For services rendered, he received Grant of land No. 43,560 for 160 acres, corporal in Capt. Witts Co., Texas Cavalry on Jan. 12, 1849. This was sold by him to Elizabeth P. Rives, May 11, 1849.

JEFFERSON COLLEGE CONFERS M. D. DEGREE

According to family tradition, Dr. Keene and Dr. Branham went to Philadelphia "for lectures," and perhaps for advanced courses. The records of Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia, show that the "degree of Doctor of Medicine was conferred on Benjamin F. Keene of Georgia in 1847." Perhaps he was absent in the Mexican War, and Dr. Henry Branham received his degree in 1845.

Dr. Keene was a member of the Board of Physicians and Surgeons of Georgia and his name is on the list of Board members Dec. 7, 1847, as is also his lifelong friend, Joel Branham.⁷ His name is on the list of Board members present in December, 1848, and on Dec. 6, 1853, Dr. R. A. T. Ridley of Troup County, was "elected in place of Dr. Keene, removed to another State."

ARRIVAL IN CALIFORNIA

The roving spirit of Dr. Keene could not withstand Horace Greeley's advice, "Go West, young man," and the Gold Rush of 1849 appealed to his wanderlust. Over land he went to California and landed in Hangtown, now Placerville, where after a flare at mining, he settled down to his chosen profession of medicine and formed a partnership with Dr. Obid Harvey. This partnership seems to have been one of real estate, also, since the records are full of their deals in property, as it was in the boom days of speculation in real estate.

STATE SENATOR FROM EL DORADO COUNTY

At the same time the partners turned their attention to politics; Dr. Keene became Senator from Eldorado County in 1852, the third session of the California Senate, and was reelected 1853-54 and 1855, over which body he presided as President pro tem, the sessions meeting in Vallejo, Benecia, and Sacramento. He was nominated in the Democratic Convention for Lieutenant-Governor, but the Democrats were de-

feated, and in 1856 he was nominated by the Democrats for State Treasurer. His death, however, occurred the day before the election.

Quoting from the *History of Eldorado County, California*, p. 22. "Hon. B. F. Keene, M.D., died of paralysis in Placerville on the 5th of September, 1856. Dr. Keene came here as a pioneer, to reside in El Dorado County at a time when society was yet quite unsettled, and the laws very little observed; by his own example and mental influence he helped to find the way out of this sordid and selfish interest towards the wholesome state of affairs that surrounds and distinguished a well-governed State. His talents and virtues were appreciated, and in 1851 he was called away from his active professional duties and important private enterprise by the vote, of rare unanimity, to fill the Office of Senator in the State Legislature. This was a place for a man to show his ability. The policy of our State government was not yet fixed, and the population filled with prejudice and jealousy toward each other, caused by different habits of education and association. It was quite a hazardous experiment to frame and adopt a system of laws to suit all the different elements of this population; but the following prosperity of the people is the best evidence of the perfectness and superiority of the laws, as well as of the men who were working hard to show their patriotism.

"And Dr. Keene was one of the most intimate lawmakers of our statute book: he not only followed the work of the Legislature with ardent zeal, but he was a leader. Twice he was honored by his colleagues with the election to the presidency of the Senate, and his constituents, to express their pride and contentment with his representation, repeatedly sent him to the Senate for four years, and but a short time before his death he was honored with the nomination to the office of State Treasurer."

FOUNDER OF THE STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Perhaps his most notable achievement will live in his organization of the "Medical Society of the State of California,"* the first Medical Society on the Pacific Coast. Having served many years on the State Board of Physicians in Georgia, he saw the need of such a society in California and was well qualified to perfect such an organization.

TRIBUTE FROM DOCTOR TITUS

Dr. Titus, who was not only his friend in his profession, but was also a Brother Mason, read a tribute before the California Medical Society in March, 1857, a part of which follows, and shows the esteem in which he was held in California.

"By the general sense of the Society, it is with perfect propriety that the delegation from the County of El Dorado have taken the lead in the melancholy duty of proposing the measures suitable to be adopted as testimonials of the respect due, from this organization, to the memory of our

* Present name, "California Medical Association."

departed President; also as a member of the local Medical Society to which he belonged, and the medical profession which he so highly esteemed, I propose here, not without some hesitation to offer in my own behalf, and that of my colleagues, a few remarks *'in Memoriam'* of the gifted and highly lamented Hon. B. F. Keene, M. D., who departed this life on the 5th day of September, A. D. 1856, in early age, and the prime of manhood.

"Not a year has elapsed since he presided over this Society, with every impulse alive to give dignity, high position, to the first general meeting of this kind ever held on the Pacific shore. All who were present, will recollect with what energy, devotedness and buoyancy of spirit he entered into the great work of redeeming, sustaining and upholding our profession from and above the thralldom of empiricism in this, the most extreme State of the 'Great West.'

"To those who witnessed this earnest vivacity, constant attendance of and lively participation in every meeting that occurred at the formation of this Society, there is none but will concur with me in saying that no member graced this hall with apparently better prospects of again joining and presiding over our deliberations, than him whom we now mourn. Gifted by all the grace, dignity and suavity of manners that compose the true gentleman, there was no person in this Golden State naturally better adapted or more competent than he, to enact the duties which he was here called upon to perform. With all the devotedness and punctuality of his nature, he embarked in the great cause of uniting, enhancing and perpetuating every interest of science connected with or embraced in the study of medicine.

"An untiring student, he toiled early and late; often has he been seen burning his midnight taper to the 'wee sma' hours ayont the twall'; indefatigable in doing every thing well, which he was called upon to perform, he no doubt overtasked his mind to such an extent, that to it we may attribute the early loss of him we now so deeply deplore. In the observance of all the proprieties of life, Dr. Keene was a most noble and impressive example. He cultivated all the virtues, minor as well as the greater. Generous to a fault; wherever his presence could afford relief to the afflicted, or give aid to the needy, there he was to be found. To the cause of education, in every particular, he gave countenance and support; anxious to promote the interest of the schools and colleges in this land, he meritoriously attended every meeting for the advancement of so great an end."

EULOGY OF DOCTOR OBID HARVEY

Dr. Obid Harvey, his former partner, then read in praise of Dr. Keene, the following:

"As reference has been had, I cannot but say a word as a passing tribute to the memory of the late lamented Dr. Benjamin F. Keene, late President of this Association.

"It has been my fortune to have been intimately connected and associated with him from the earliest history of this country to the time of his death, and associated, too, in the practice of that noble profession which we are now representing. And I may add, that it has been the misfortune of many, as well as myself, to lose in him one of the noblest and dearest of friends. Dr. Keene came to this country from the State of Georgia, in the year 1849, and like most men, professional or otherwise, engaged in the pursuit of mining; but from his high professional attainments he soon succeeded to an enviable practice and reputation in the profession, which he has ever maintained.

"Some portion of his life has been connected with the political history of this country. During four years, he represented the county of Eldorado in the Senate of this State, and with that ability, honesty and fidelity known to but few, that, had his life been spared one day longer, he would again have been chosen to represent a confiding constituency in the councils of this State.

"A short time before his death he was foremost in issuing a call to form a Medical Society in the county in which he lived, of which he was an ardent and working member. His devotion to the sciences and application for useful knowledge had no bounds, and he was a model for any of us to imitate. His character as a man of honesty, integrity and morality, was beyond reproach. As a man of amiability and high social qualifications he scarcely had an equal. Friends he had many—enemies none. To know him was but to love and admire him. Not one year has passed away since Dr. Keene was chosen the presiding officer of this Association. The dignity and ability with which he presided over our deliberations; his amiability and courteous demeanor have endeared him to us all. He is now no more. Suddenly, and in the meridian of life, he has been called hence, and may we not hope to take a place in a better world. . . ."

BURIAL PLACE IN PLACERVILLE

Dr. Keene was buried with Masonic Honors in the Old City Cemetery, Sacramento Hill, Placerville, California. On the headstone marking his grave is carved a Masonic Emblem, followed by the words: "B. F. Keene, M.D., a native of Georgia and first President of the California's State Medical Society." When this grave was located in 1912 by his granddaughter, Louise Frederick Hays, the slab had fallen and was broken; but in 1923 the California Medical Association had the old slab embedded in concrete on top of the grave, and a new marker placed at the head.

DOCTOR KEENE'S REMARKS AT THE ORGANIZATION OF THE STATE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

At the Organization Meeting of the California Medical Society, held in Sacramento, March 12, 1856, Dr. Keene was unanimously elected President, and, according to records, on taking the

chair, "Dr. Keene addressed the Convention, returning thanks for the distinguished favor extended him. He regarded the Convention as composed of the representatives of a profession which the necessities of our race have consecrated and set apart as the only finite power capable of removing the ills to which we are subjected—a profession leading the way in the amelioration of the race. Up to this period, he said, the profession in this State had been indebted to individual effort for all it had attained. He congratulated the Convention on the probable results of combined action now about being instituted, and advised the adoption of measures most calculated to secure the ends in view. In this movement they had the encouragement and support of all good citizens in the State. He then spoke of the mighty influences of causes which operate on the frame, presenting effects truly strange and astonishing, and particularly of the suddenness with which young men in California are visited with indications of old age, possibly through the occult causes in the atmosphere around us. He remarked also, in this connection, on the frequent unhealthy manifestations in the moral world, and asked if they could not be traced to physical causes. He had never before met with any body more earnest in a desire to coöperate in the advancement of the interests and the elevation of the tone of the medical profession. With other general remarks, the speaker concluded, eliciting marked expressions of commendation from the Convention."

SECOND SESSION OF THE CALIFORNIA MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, FEBRUARY 11, 1857

Dr. Keene died September 5, 1856, and the Second Session of the Medical Society of the State of California met on February 11, 1857, Dr. E. S. Cooper, Senior, vice-president, presiding. In an address, Dr. J. F. Montgomery, chairman of the Committee of Arrangements, said: "Acting upon the general impulse pervading other minds, you met in this hall a twelvemonth since, (and with you the pure and gallant spirit who was called to preside over your deliberations, and whose many virtues, he now being no more, it will devolve upon some others to portray), and established an epoch in the history of medicine in California by organizing this Society." And in his President's annual Address, Dr. Cooper said: "Although I detest superfluous verbiage, and particularly when it embraces apologies for shortcomings, still, in this case, I should state that it was not until a short time preceding the meeting of this Society, that I was reminded by the Corresponding Secretary of having to take the place of the lamented Dr. Keene, and to perform, in my very imperfect manner, the duties of a proud station, which, but for his death, might have been executed with so much dignity and satisfaction by him. In view of what was expected of Dr. Keene, in furnishing the President's Annual Address, considering his eloquence and brilliant talents, my present position is truly embarrassing."

It is interesting to note that Dr. Thomas M. Logan of Charleston, South Carolina traveled by

steamship from New Orleans to San Francisco, in 1849, and located in the Placerville-Sacramento section. Dr. Logan also played an important part in the medical history of California, reestablishing it in 1870.⁸ There can be no doubt of the friendship between Dr. Keene and Dr. Logan. They were about the same age, both came to California in 1849, both located in Hangtown, and both remained in California the rest of their lives, Dr. Keene dying in 1856, and Dr. Logan in 1876.

When Dr. Keene organized the "Medical Society of the State of California" and was made its President, Dr. Logan was elected Corresponding Secretary. Dr. Keene appointed Dr. Logan Chairman of the Committee on the Medical Journal, which made him ex-officio Chairman of the Committee on Publications. In the minutes of the Medical Society, called, "Transactions of the California State Medical Society, 1856-1859," there is a "Report on Medical Topography, Meteorology, Endemics and Epidemics" by Thomas M. Logan, M.D., Chairman of the Committee, covering fifty pages, including many diagrams.

In 1870, Dr. Logan organized the California State Board of Health, and his portrait is a much prized possession of the California Department of Public Health, and hangs in their office in Sacramento.

A portrait of Dr. Keene is in possession of the estate of his great granddaughter, the late Louise Wescott Samford, in Opelika, Alabama. When the Governor of the State of California was told of the existence of this portrait, he asked that a copy be presented the State of California. This letter was followed by similar requests from the California State Board of Health, and the California State Medical Society. The California Medical Society has commissioned an artist to make a copy of the original portrait, which will be hung in their office in San Francisco.⁹

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REFERENCES

- 1 Vital Statistics, Lynn, Mass.
 - 2 *American Journal of Medical Sciences*, Vol. III, 1828.
 - 3 Jones County Records.
 - 4 Records of Board of Medical Examiners, Georgia Archives In Cherokee Land Lottery, 1838, Benj. F. Keene, 293d Jasper Co., drew lot 227, 15th Dist., 2nd Section.
 - 5 Jasper County Records.
 - 6 Jasper County Records.
 - 7 Records, Board of Physicians, Georgia Archives, called *Minutes, Board Medical Examiners*.
 - 8 See CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE, issue of October, 1937, on page 250.
 - 9 The painting referred to was received at the 71st annual session of the California Medical Association, held at Del Monte, May 3-6, 1942, and elicited much comment. It now has a place of honor in the Central Office of the Association, at Four Fifty Sutter, San Francisco.
- For other references to Benjamin F. Keene, M.D., and Thomas F. Logan, M.D., see CALIFORNIA AND WESTERN MEDICINE, in issue of January, 1940, on pages 2 and 6.—C.M.A. Committee on History, Morton R. Gibbons, Sr., Chairman.

To reduce the incidence of damage to the kidneys from treatment with sulfathiazole, Travis Winsor, M. D., and George E. Burch, M. D., New Orleans, advise in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* that, among other things, before the drug is administered "one must be sure that the patient has not already taken the drug without the knowledge of the doctor."